Ms. Kirsten Lindbloom
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Coordinator, Mower County Chemical Health Coalition

Mower County Fights Back Against Meth

After a fatal Meth-related explosion on January 13, 2001 the Mower County Chemical Health Coalition, in its mission to respond quickly to community issues related to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, started what would become a five year effort to fight Mower County's meth problem using multiple strategies in multiple sectors.

In August 2001, the Mower County Chemical Health Coalition (MCCHC), a Drug-free Communities Support Program Grantee, formed a task force to respond to Mower County's meth issue. The MCCHC developed a strategic plan which included community education, a community-based media campaign and policy change. Over the years the Meth Task Force has evolved and has become the Austin Area Meth Task Force, chaired by City of Austin Mayor Bonnie Rietz. As a community we have made a commitment to fighting our meth problem by creating solutions.

Community Education Efforts:

- Community Action meetings
- Drug-free student clubs target meth for peer education
- Local meth experts (law enforcement, county attorney, chemical dependency specialist, corrections and a parent of an addicted child) travel throughout Mower County making presentations to greater county communities
- Local sheriff provides training for utilities workers, social workers, and other professionals working in clients' homes
- Presentations to youth groups and area schools
- Parent support group formed
- Anonymous tip line (Meth Busters)
- Parent WarmLine/Línea de Apoyo y Comprensión Paterna (phone support for parents)

Community-Based Media:

- Newspaper Columns
- Print advertising
- Television advertising
- Documentary on the impact of meth on our community created
- Meth Extreme Makeover campaign including print, television, billboards, theatre ads, posters, buttons, word bracelets and car magnets

Policy Change:

- May 2003 State Legislation-Meth Precursor
- January 2004 County Meth "clean-up" Ordinance
- September 2005 Austin regulates the sale of pseudo-ephedrine products (1st in MN)
- April 2005 Mower County follows suit, regulating pseudo-ephedrine products
- June 2005 State considers state-wide legislation regulating pseudo-ephedrine products

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead-

Article reprinted from the Minneapolis/St. Paul City Pages May 14, 2003

Embedded in Austin:

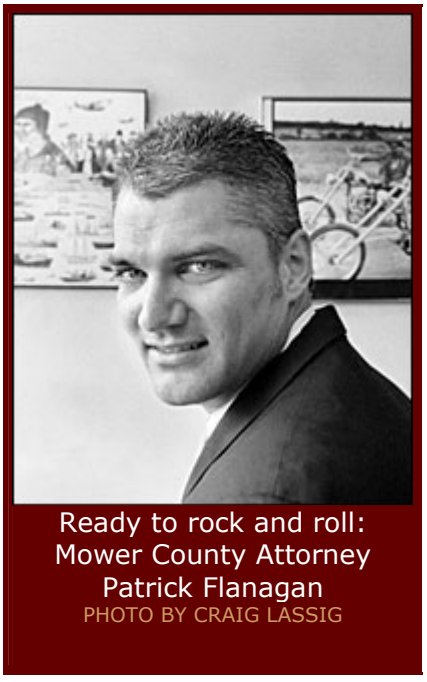
On the ground in one of Minnesota's meth hot spots

By Brad Zellar 05/14/03

One of the most enduring entertainments in any small town is the local paper's police blotter. These dispatches, concise and yet somehow rambling at the same time, have always been a reliable compendium of banal events and infractions. *Raccoon acting suspiciously*. *Police talked to residents in the 600 block of Third Street about dogs chewing up garbage*. *Police cited a person for burning a sofa in his yard*.

You'll still find such typical and relatively benign scuttlebutt in the Austin Daily Herald--the items above are all real reports from that newspaper--but in recent years the blotter has grown longer and more confusing. *Officers were notified of a large purchase of Sudafed*. *Man charged with possession of anhydrous ammonia in an improper container*. *Two men arrested for drugs and felony gun charges*. Nor is the change confined to the fine-print columns. It's in the headlines, too: *Meth lab arrests include a mother, her daughter*. *Seven face meth charges*. *Thefts tied to meth trade*. *Warning signs of meth use*.

Again, these are all from the Austin Daily Herald. This is my hometown. I know this place, or I did. What the hell is going on?



Ready to rock and roll: Mower County Attorney Patrick Flanagan
PHOTO BY CRAIG LASSIG

The emergence of methamphetamine as the drug of choice round the rural Midwest happened so fast that local authorities barely registered it at first. They'd heard stories about the havoc meth was wreaking on the West Coast, but nobody figured the drug would travel so fast or put down roots so easily.

In 1994 there were three meth lab seizures in the state; in 2001, over 300. And in the little towns in southeast Minnesota--including those of Mower County, where Austin is located--the problem is especially immediate. Minnesota law enforcement has carved the state into 23 regional drug task force sectors; of the 350 Minnesota lab seizures in 2000-2001, 44 were in Mower's tiny section of the state's southeast corner. Statewide, that number was exceeded only by Anoka-Hennepin counties, with 57.

Austin and the surrounding communities did not see their first lab seizure until October 1999, but they have had their hands full ever since. In the last couple of years the county has seen high-profile federal indictments of members of a California gang that was distributing meth in the county--as well as a steady stream of arrests and lab seizures, a surge in underage treatment referrals, and a lab explosion that killed a man and resulted in two third-degree murder convictions for his accomplices.

Austin's not particularly rustic so far as small towns go. Maybe it's stretching things to call it a small town at all. Ninety miles south of the Twin Cities, Austin is the Mower county seat and the home of Hormel, a Fortune 500 company that is the town's main employer. Of 23,314 local residents, 1,500 are employed in the company's flagship meatpacking plant, while another 600 labor in the Hormel corporate offices. Eight hundred people--a majority of them recent immigrants--also work in the Quality Pork Processing slaughterhouse that is a Hormel offshoot.

Despite the presence of Hormel, Austin is a relatively isolated community, surrounded on all sides by farm fields and little towns. Equal parts blue-collar slaughterhouse town and modestly affluent white-collar suburb, Austin has always been a puzzling place--a company town where there were certainly haves and have-nots, but also one where class integration was more or less forced by logistic realities. The children of the folks in the corporate office went to the same schools and played on the same sports teams as the kids of the guys who labored in the blood room at the slaughterhouse.

Austin has changed drastically in the 20 years since I moved away. A wrenching Hormel strike in the mid-1980s took a toll on the city's economy that is only beginning to ease. The immigrants who have moved here in the meantime deserve a lot of the credit for adding life and vibrancy to Austin again. Main Street, once lined with empty storefronts and struggling businesses, is now home to a number of Mexican groceries and restaurants, a thriving barbecue joint, and a coffee shop. As ever, the downtown area to the east of Main Street is crowded with no-nonsense bars.

Much of the meth out there is locally produced, according to Austin Police Chief Paul Philipp

PHOTO BY CRAIG LASSIG

"We actually have a couple decent video stores now, a tremendous public library, and a handful of excellent restaurants," an Austin friend of mine said. "We have diversity now, and with the influx of immigrants we've also seen a new wave of kids coming into the schools. The truth is that this little town has actually become a pretty decent place to live."

And what about those meth headlines? "Maybe I'm not paying attention or I'm just being naïve," he shrugged, "but I don't think it's anything new. The bad guys are here, and they've always been here. We've always had a homegrown drug problem, and I don't buy this notion that drugs are being imported on any significant scale."

Mower County Sheriff's detective Glen Farnum begs to differ. "Meth is the scourge of the earth," Farnum said without hesitation. "It's the worst thing to come down the pipe in years. We have a hell of a problem on our hands. These dealers are like weeds; you arrest a few and a week later another batch has popped up. And you get people on this stuff and you can't get 'em off it. It's wrecking a lot of lives."

Judging by the sheer frequency and number of meth stories in the Daily Herald--I counted 160 between 1999 and the summer of 2002--it appears that Austin is not quite the same as ever.

I hadn't been back in town for two hours before I'd made contacts with a huge mix of people willing and anxious to talk to me about meth--people in law enforcement and chemical dependency treatment, users and recovering addicts, families caught up in the net. Every time I made a phone call, the word would be passed around and I would get half a dozen calls in return.

To preserve the anonymity of the people whose lives have been most directly affected, the names of all users and their families have been changed here.

Patrick Flanagan is the Mower County attorney, and after working in the DA's office for a number of years he has only recently moved into the hot seat. Last November he ousted his old boss, Pat Ohman, at the ballot box. A young, gung ho prosecutor whose office is decorated with *Easy Rider* and James Dean posters and Rolling Stones album covers, Flanagan knew pretty well what he was getting into. By the time he came to town, the county's meth problem was already a standing beat on the local news.

At some point in the late 1990s, a small group of alleged California white supremacists migrated across the border from a small town in Iowa and took up residence in Lyle, a township just outside of Austin. These characters were reputedly part of a self-styled Riverside, California gang called the Inland Empire, and they were fiercely proud of the peckerwood label they had appropriated for themselves. The original Inland Empire incursion consisted of just two guys, and law enforcement officials allege that they quickly began importing large quantities of meth from California. There may have been some meth in the area when they arrived, but their efforts appear to have broken the market wide open.

"These guys were really the first big wave," Flanagan said. "They roped a lot of kids into their deal, and they ran a very well-organized business. The kind of markup they could make on meth here was just incredible. They could cut the stuff with horse-joint ointment and make up to $60,000 a pound. They were paranoid--all of these people are, it's one of the hallmarks of this drug--and they ran all kinds of crazy counter-surveillance, with video cameras and lookouts and you name it."

In a town like Austin, the California guys stood out from the beginning. Their shaved heads, flashy lifestyles, and elaborate tattoos ensured that local law enforcement would start paying attention to their activities sooner rather than later.

"To a 15-year-old Austin kid," Flanagan goes on, "these guys were very compelling. They had tattoos, cool cars, lots of cash, a house to party at, and they didn't have to work very hard to build up a loyal following."

Shortly after the California gang came to town, one of the ringleaders was arrested for possessing 30 pounds of marijuana and sent away to prison for a year and a half. Upon his release he came right back and set up shop in Lyle again. By this time--early 2000--local meth users had learned to make the drug on their own through a relatively simple process.

"Once people figured out how easy it was to make the stuff themselves," said 12-year-veteran Austin Police Chief Paul Philipp, "that's when we really had a problem on our hands. I'd say that right now a majority of the meth that's out there is probably locally produced, which creates problems for us on so many levels. The labs are dangerous, of course, but there's also all the other crimes that come with making and using the stuff. A lot of the ingredients are stolen from local businesses, and you've got these people going out into the country to tap the anhydrous ammonia right out of the fertilizer tanks in the fields. Then you've got kids stealing from their parents and users who are stealing whatever they can get their hands on to finance their habits. By the time you throw in impairment-related offenses or domestic problems--assaults, car accidents, child neglect--it has a huge trickle-down effect."

Before meth came along, Philipp said, cocaine and marijuana were the drugs the Austin police department most commonly encountered. "But realistically, in a town this size, all those other drugs are much more difficult to come by," he said. "Meth has definitely become the drug of choice in our area. And I'm afraid we're still just seeing the tip of the iceberg."

Around these parts the drug's popularity is increasing ominously among younger users. Mower County has been seeing meth use among kids as young as 13 and 14, and there are other aspects of the Austin experience that call into question some prevailing myths about the drug. Meth is always portrayed as a poor, rural, white-trash drug, but in Austin and nearby towns its use cuts a wide swath across social and economic strata. Many locals would like to blame the drug's upsurge on the influx of Mexicans in recent years, but there's very little evidence to support that idea. The majority of people making, selling, and using the drug are in fact white kids, many of them locals from seemingly stable middle-class homes.

It makes sense that meth is principally a rural phenomenon. First, of course, where there are farms, there is the anhydrous ammonia required for refining the meth; it's a commonly used fertilizer. A town like Austin also offers ready access to the other necessary ingredients. Places like Shopko, HyVee, Target, K-Mart, and various hardware stores and farm suppliers make relatively easy the acquisition of such meth prerequisites as cold capsules, white gas, and camera batteries. As such bulk purchases have begun to raise red flags with retailers, meth producers have begun shoplifting the ingredients instead. And the rural terrain itself affords endless advantages.

"This is a conspicuous drug to produce right in town," Philipp said. "It stinks, for one thing, and you'll have people coming and going from these houses at all hours. But meth is also a very mobile, portable drug, and there's a lot of country out there around us. These guys can drive out into the country and make this stuff out of the trunk of their car on a gravel road and then toss all their garbage in the ditch. They can pull into a campground or go back in the woods. They'll rent these farmhouses or trailers, produce a bunch of the stuff and then just pull up stakes. It's very hard to pin these people down."

Enforcement is further complicated by a combination of technical sophistication and paranoia on the part of the dealers, who use global positioning systems to stash and track packages of the drug in rural ditches. Local authorities are also seeing more meth labs wired with all manner of surveillance equipment. Occasionally a beat-up thousand-dollar trailer home beached on a scrub lot in the country turns out to have a $20,000 security system.

The other factor in meth's grip on rural areas is an explanation that has for the most part eluded the adults wrestling with the problem. But it's the first explanation kids offer for the drug's popularity.

"This place is boring," one teenager told me at the municipal parking lot one night. Travis and his friends are all 15 to 17, and marked with the insecure braggadocio of small-towners everywhere. They all admit to having used meth or knowing others who have. "It's everywhere," Travis said. "And it's not just the so-called bad kids who do it, it's everyone. There's all kinds of kids who are doing it.

"And that first time is great," he goes on. "Everyone will tell you that. Everyone will talk about the first time. It's really intense, and you feel powerful."

"The girls like it because they lose weight," a friend adds.

"They lose a *lot* of weight," Travis said. "Even the guys. You'll see these big jocks lose like 40 pounds in six months, and their parents don't even wonder what's going on."

The next day I drove out to a house in the country to meet with Richard, a 19-year-old now living in self-imposed exile from the world of meth. The farmhouse where Richard is staying is marooned in the middle of fields and gravel roads a considerable distance from Austin. When I finally found the place I was taken aback by how isolated it was. The modest house was situated on a farm lot down a long gravel driveway, and there were no vehicles to be seen. Richard, a skinny, slightly hunched kid, met me at the back door.

"It's not just the so-called bad kids who do it, it's everyone," says one Austin teen

PHOTO BY CRAIG LASSIG

"I was 16 when I first started smoking meth," he said. Previously he had been a decent enough student. Despite an attention-deficit problem for which he took Ritalin, he managed to hold a B average.

"It's an amazing high," he said. "You could drink yourself stupid, and after one hit of meth you were stone cold sober. When you're on it you have these incredibly intense thoughts. People think you're just whacked out of your head, but I was having very serious thoughts, thinking about my life and my family. I felt like my mind grew so much when I was using meth. I could just sit down and read books, which I'd never really done before. I was supposed to write this one-page report for school on the band Tool, and I ended up writing ten pages. It was amazing. My teacher was an old lady, a churchie, and she was just blown away."

After a relatively short time, Richard discovered what so many other tweakers had discovered before him. He couldn't quite hit those old peaks anymore. "You're always trying to capture that first high again," he said. "It's never, ever gonna happen, but you keep trying."

Richard started skipping school and got suspended during his sophomore year. After his mom left for work each morning, "it was just *game on* for that day. Everybody would come over and we'd just sit around smoking meth all day. I've had forty or fifty people in a room this size, just elbow to elbow, everybody doing it. It wasn't just white-trash kids, it wasn't country kids. It was jocks, rich kids, city kids, everybody was doing meth.

"And it wasn't the Mexican Mafia or the White Power guys from California. They may have brought it in here, but it would have happened without them. I had a friend whose mom would buy it for us and we'd sit right there in her house getting fucked up. I used to smoke it with one of my teacher's husbands. It was everywhere."

Richard weighed 180 pounds when he first started smoking meth, but he quickly plummeted to 119. "I once stayed up for 14 straight days, just smoking constantly," he said. "I would sit right over there at that big picture window and I would literally hear voices and see people coming out of the trees, coming out of the fields. They were absolutely real to me."

The turning point came when one of Richard's best friends showed up at his door and held a gun to his head over a drug debt. "This was a guy who I would literally trust with my life," he said. "It was unreal."

These days he's trying to lay low and get some semblance of his life back. "I've been clean for six months now," he said. "I think I realize that my family and friends are worth a lot more than getting fucked up. The way you can escape it is to just separate yourself from it entirely, but it's hard. When you're in a small town and all your friendships go back to when you were kids, it's hard to start over." Richard pauses and lights a cigarette, and stares out that big picture window at the empty fields stretching away into the distance.

"I wish I didn't know what I know," said Jack Wittkopp, who coordinates chemical dependency services for the Austin Medical Center. "You have to recognize that this is a problem that is significantly concentrated among adolescents and young adults. You seldom see old-time tweakers, and that's because older people who use meth tend to not use it every day, or for such prolonged periods. You hate to use the term 'casual user,' but most of these people use the drug occasionally, and for specific purposes, whether it's purely social, or for staying awake while driving or working. The kids obviously have a different approach, and are much more likely to adopt meth as their drug of choice, and to seriously abuse it."

Even after getting clean, it's difficult to settle back into a normal life, say former users

PHOTO BY CRAIG LASSIG

The result of that abuse, Wittkopp said, is a bunch of seriously depressed kids whose ability to cope with the perils of adolescence--school, family, depression, social pressure--is seriously handicapped by meth's depletion of dopamine. "They can no longer experience any pleasure without the drug," Wittkopp said. "And when they get out of treatment they have to go back to the same pressures they were looking at when they came in. As far as the dopamine depletion is considered, you wonder, 'Can that change?' There are some early studies that suggest that the brain can regenerate dopamine, although very slowly. There are also other good recent studies that say the depletion is permanent, which is a terrifying prospect for people in my line of work." While Wittkopp insists that meth poses a serious and daunting challenge, he also acknowledges that alcohol remains a bigger and more pervasive problem in Mower County. "No question," he said. "Strictly in terms of long-term social consequences and problems at the family level, alcohol is our number one chemical problem, and that is always a product of its ready availability and social acceptance."

Wittkopp's also said that he's not ready to throw in the towel on meth. "I'd have to say I have a guarded prognosis at this time," he said. "I'm not optimistic, but I'm not ready to give up, either. We have the advantage of being able to implement a community approach to dealing with this problem, getting families and neighborhoods and schools involved, and educating people about meth and its consequences. You really do have a responsibility as a community to let these guys know that your town is not up for grabs. You need to send a message that you're going to look out for your kids."

My second night in Austin I got together with three women, members of a recently formed support group for parents whose children have been caught up in meth abuse. We met around the kitchen table of someone I'll call Mary. All three--they call themselves the meth mothers, and say their kids call them the psycho moms--tell remarkably similar stories.

"I realize that my family and friends are worth a lot more than getting fucked up"

PHOTO BY CRAIG LASSIG

"I missed a lot of the signs," Mary said. "You'll hear that from most parents. I knew absolutely nothing about meth. I mean, my daughter was 14 years old at the time, an excellent student, responsible, dependable, active in everything. And then at the end of eighth grade year her grades suddenly dropped drastically. That summer all hell broke loose. Her behavior changed dramatically. There were temper tantrums and just this constant attitude. She was always sneaking around and staying out late, and I eventually caught her drinking. I wanted to believe, of course, that this was just the normal rebellion that kids go through at that age."

Mary battled her daughter all summer, a fight she knew she was losing, and in the fall things continued to slide. Her daughter stopped bringing home homework and didn't want to go to school. She started dating a 17-year-old dropout, and spent most of her time at home sulking and surfing the Internet. "I wish now I'd never bought that computer," Mary said. Her daughter eventually started staying out all night, and finally ran away. After each blowup Mary would get in her car and go out searching for her daughter, often banging on the doors of residences she now knows were meth houses. She would drag her daughter home and try to talk with her, but increasingly found herself getting nowhere. She accompanied her to school and met with the principal and the school's liaison officer. Desperate, she finally hauled her daughter to the hospital and had her tested for drugs. When she tested positive for marijuana and methamphetamine, Mary couldn't have been more shocked.

She educated herself in a hurry, and started rabble-rousing in town for greater vigilance on the part of parents, schools, and law enforcement. She began patrolling the town on her own, writing down license plate numbers outside meth houses. "And guess what I got for Christmas?" she said. "A police scanner." A number of the other meth mothers also log hours at their own scanners, listening for familiar names and keeping tabs on the local meth community.

When her daughter ran away for a second time, Mary had had enough, and packed her off to a group home in a neighboring community.

"Been there, done that," Anna said. Her daughter's problems also started in the summer before her freshman year in high school, when she started hanging out with a new group of friends and staying out past her curfew. "Whenever she was around we were just arguing all the time; whatever I said it was always, 'You don't understand.' She finally told me to go to hell and left for the weekend.

"I eventually just threw up my hands and told the people at the Sheriff's office that I wanted them to do everything within the law to scare the living hell out of her. I told them I wanted her picked up and tested, and they said they couldn't administer a urine test without the kid's permission. How bullshit is that? They're your kids, living under your roof, and they have to give you consent to give them a drug test."

Anna eventually sent her daughter to live with a family in another town. "I had to get a lawyer and sign away my parental rights," she recalls. "We transferred her school records over there. They got her a job, and I think during that time away it all finally sunk in for her. She knew she was nailed, and I wasn't going to give in. Since she's been back her grades are back up and she's been clean for a year and a half."

Mary's daughter is also now clean, and is attempting with some difficulty to settle back into her old life. Deb has not been as fortunate. Hers has been the longest, most discouraging battle. She keeps a scrapbook of every newspaper article from the last couple of years that have any bearing on the county's meth problem. It's a seriously fat, seriously appalling archive, six inches thick and overflowing with clippings. "I've run out of pages," she admits, and hands over another pile of Xeroxed articles from the last several months.

"I went through the same thing these guys did," she said. "Exactly the same routine. I've tried tough love; believe me, I've tried everything, but nothing has worked." Deb slides a school portrait across the table, a photo of a healthy, attractive girl who could have been a cheerleader.

"She moved out for good a year ago," she said. "It had gotten so bad that she was pushing and shoving me around and my husband and I were at each other's throats. She was destroying herself and destroying our family. I have a stressful job, and I felt like I was endangering other people's lives when I was staying up until three o'clock in the morning every day dealing with this."

Deb finally let her daughter go, and it's clear how much it still torments her. Her daughter is now hanging around with skinhead tweakers, she said, and dating a 28-year-old. She has acquired unattractive homemade tattoos.

"You don't want to think of your kid selling herself for money," Deb said. "But you have to be realistic. She has no job, as far as I know she's not stealing, and we've never had anything missing from our house. I can't imagine any other reason these guys would keep her around."

Mary's daughter, Tina, is now 15 years old. After the meth moms retreat to the living room, she sits down at the kitchen table to talk. She has the slightly guarded, flat-line demeanor of teenagers everywhere. She's clearly not shy, but she's also not effusive. She looks remarkably healthy, and looking at her in her T-shirt and gym shorts it's hard to imagine that a year ago she was just another of Mower County's growing meth statistics.

"The first time I ever heard about meth I was at my ex-boyfriend's house with him and a bunch of his friends," she recalls. "I didn't know anything about it, and had no idea what it was. They just asked if I wanted to do some shit. That's what it was called. I think I was hooked after that one time. It was this instant rush. My heart was racing and my hands started sweating. It was like nothing fazed you when you were on it. I felt like I was really powerful."

The first time Tina smoked meth she stayed up all night and all the next day, and then went out and did it again the next night. "I was the first one in my group of friends to try it," she said. "I'm an impulsive kind of person, and I like an adrenaline rush. I'm a daredevil, and I didn't care what it was or what was in it. I just liked it. Lots of

other girls got into through the guys. The whole weight-loss thing, lots of girls like that part of it. I wouldn't say everybody is doing it, but probably half. Even the jocks are druggies now."

Before long Tina was running around with a whole new group of friends, and palling around with the Inland Empire boys and their crowd. Soon she was staying up for days at a time and falling out of touch with everything else. She began seeing disturbing changes in the people around her, changes she was in no condition to process.

"I remember being at this house one time after I had run away," Tina remembers. "There was this kid who had been up for like two or three weeks straight and he was picking at his nose because he thought there were bugs crawling around in there. He's picked these big, bloody holes in his nostrils, and he finally took a scissors and cut into his nostrils on both sides."

Tina also recalls watching as one of her friends was whittled away by meth. "This guy was one of my good friends," she said. "He was this big guy, buff. All the girls wanted him. But he got involved with the California guys and started using meth. I ran into him at the store one time and he wasn't making any sense. He was really skinny, just a total skeleton, and I sort of realized how messed up it all was."

Tina said she's trying to get her old life back, and to regain the trust of her mother, but it's not so easy. "Right now it's still kind of hard," she said. "This is a small town and all these people are still around, and meth's still around. My old friends have been really supportive, and teachers and counselors try to understand, but they still don't really get it. I don't know yet what's going to happen. I've been through a lot, more than most people probably go through in their whole life. I can't tell if that part of my life is over, or if my life is just over, period. I'd like to be a chef, though, or I want to deliver babies. I watch these shows on TV all the time and I just think it would be cool to bring kids into the world."

Terese Amazi of Mower County is the first woman sheriff ever elected in Minnesota. She's only been on the job for a few months, but has been with the department for 15 years. When I stop by her office she's playing fetch with Tia, an amiable and rambunctious drug-sniffing dog that lives with her and her family. Tia is trained to detect coke, crack, marijuana, mushrooms, heroin, and meth, and Amazi keeps her pretty busy these days.

Amazi is married to an Austin cop, and she has a lot of experience with drug enforcement, and meth in particular. She started her career doing undercover drug work. "My first day on the job I did an undercover marijuana buy," she said. Amazi took office with a mandate to address the county's meth problem, and she's already taken an active role in tracking down and prosecuting offenders while also coordinating an aggressive education program in local communities and schools. She is also working with Austin Representative Jeff Anderson to pass a state precursor law that would make it a crime to possess one or more common meth ingredients with intent to manufacture. As things now stand in the state, law enforcement can pull over a driver in possession of substantial quantities of cold capsules, white gas, and lithium strips, and yet have no legal grounds for arrest or confiscation.

"We're also working with area merchants to get ephedrine products locked up behind the counter," she said. "We've had good luck with the locally owned businesses, but the bigger corporations like Target and K-Mart have been resistant, which is frustrating."

Amazi is quick to point out the perils of meth use and production for cookers, users, and law enforcement alike. "It's not like anything else," she said. "This is not speed. It's not even the same meth of 20 years ago. And you can chip away at the production and distribution of it, but that doesn't address the demand, and where there's demand there's always going to be somebody else waiting in the wings to come in and make a profit."

There's also the issue of the drug's effects and highly addictive nature.

"It's such an unpredictable drug," Amazi said. "People get seriously goofy on it, and there's no telling what they'll do. We have to be prepared for just about anything." She tells the story of one cooker whose house caught fire--so he and his pals loaded a burning sofa into the back of a truck and tore off down the highway. "They obviously didn't exactly have any sort of plan in mind," she said. And then there was the kid who, roaring on meth, kicked his mother out of the car as they were driving on the freeway. After he was arrested he kicked out the window in a moving squad car and dove out onto the pavement, breaking all the bones in his face. "He didn't even realize what he had done until he woke up in intensive care," Amazi said.

Sheriff's Detective Glen Farnum recalls responding to a report of a domestic disturbance in a nearby town. "When we got there it was clear this guy had been using meth and was out of his gourd," Farnum said. "He was in the bathroom and we were trying to get him to come out. He climbed into the bathtub and just started sawing away at

his own neck with a knife. The guy cut his own throat." Another time Farnum responded to a meth lab in a rural trailer. "We found all these brain-damaged cats wobbling around the place," he said. "These poor cats couldn't walk and their hair was falling out in big clumps. I'm telling you, this stuff is unbelievable. It just rots people's minds. I don't think there's any hope."

There may not be any hope, but the Mower County police and sheriff's departments may have caught a considerable break in January, when 50 state, local, and federal agents staged a series of raids in and around Austin and charged Peter Noe, Tim Schultz, and another of their California associates, Terry Bauman, with conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine and marijuana. Two Austin residents, Arthur Clennon and Amy Marie Placek, were also named in the federal indictments, and the authorities allegedly confiscated 550 grams of meth and 220 pounds of marijuana. The main players, Noe and Schultz, remain in federal custody, and their case is scheduled for trial June 2.

"The fact that the feds felt that we had a significant enough problem to get involved is huge for us," County Attorney Patrick Flanagan said. "It really speaks to the extent of the problem we have here, and is an acknowledgement that what's been going on isn't just confined to small local players. It's long been our belief that we were dealing with an organized outfit that was operating at a very large scale, and what they were doing wasn't confined to Mower County."

"I do believe we're already seeing some positive effects from heightened awareness, but at this point it would be naïve to be too optimistic," Philipp said. "There are people out there who are still making and selling this stuff. And I'm afraid the demand is still there as well, so I'm certainly not ready to say we're out of the woods yet. With budget cuts and the state's financial position, I expect there's going to be a significant drain on everybody, and we're already treading water down here."

Terese Amazi concurs with her colleague on that count. "The DEA's assistance has been critical for us," she said. "We honestly couldn't afford most of the stuff we do without federal funding, so we have to cross our fingers that programs don't get cut. The problem, unfortunately, is that the cat's already out of the bag. I'm afraid we're going to see more and more meth. It's just so hard to shut it down completely when the ingredients are still so readily available and we have anhydrous ammonia in every farmer's field."

Glen Farnum listens to Amazi and just shakes his head. "The thing people don't realize is that there's no one contributing factor or one small segment of the population who's doing this," he said. "If people think it's not a problem or it's not going to happen to them, they're nuts. They're just out of their minds.